

Policy With Purpose

SYRACUSE
Should we help Mikhail Gorbachev? Those who say we should have consistent positions on Baltic independence (help him stop captive nations from pulling the Union apart); on trade (help him with food and technology to alleviate domestic unrest), and on arms reduction (help him demobilize costly troops while modernizing his missiles).

It's a sure-fire simplifier, but it's the wrong question. Mr. Gorbachev is not a constant, like the speed of light. He is a variable, a grand improvisationist, and we must not try to set the parameters of our foreign policy in personality quicksilver.

Instead, we should ask: What kind of Soviet Union would be best for world freedom and peace?

That's easy: one that develops democracy at home and drops adventurism abroad.

But the follow-up is harder: What direction should we encourage the Soviets to take that will reach that goal?

One direction is continued decontrol; the other is the reassertion of control. Both directions can lead to dangerous extremes.

If decontrol gets out of hand, the danger is chaos — perhaps the first civil war within a nuclear power.

By focusing on that danger of decontrol, our foreign-policy makers embrace order and stability, and are willing to condone Moscow's severity in putting down separatism and in moving so slowly toward the necessary market system.

If, on the other hand, the reassertion of control gets out of hand, the danger is renewed dictatorship: crackdowns on dissent and a re-

turn to a rigid command economy.

By focusing on that danger of reasserted control, veteran cold warriors accept the risk of internal chaos. We would take advantage of today's Soviet weakness by demanding hard-to-undo changes: to get Soviet troops out of its old empire, to end the Soviet strategic land-missile edge, to get persecutables out while the getting is good.

In reality, our debate is not about "Should we help Gorbachev?" but "Which danger is worse: anarchy or despotism?"

But that is not what the debate should be about. The struggle of

Let's help ourselves.

strawmen is inherently phony. We are foolish to make decisions based on fears of extremes; instead, we should choose between likely alternatives.

In the decontrol direction, more likely than chaos and civil war is a breakup of the Soviet internal empire into a confederation of most of the present republics. Russia would be dominant and the only Soviet nuclear power.

Now face about: in the direction of tighter central control, more likely than a fearsome new Stalin is a semi-dictatorial Gorbachev who has broken up the Communist bureaucracy and managed to weather the

economic storm without adopting a market system or representative government.

That's our realistic choice, undistracted by the strawmen of strife vs. Stalinism. Either the Soviet Union will loosen up, with the component parts prospering in varying degrees — or it will tighten up, with the Union's peoples continuing to suffer hardship as Moscow modernizes its military.

Which direction suits America's national interest? Toward loosening, of course; better for freedom and peace in the world (and better for the standard of living of Soviet peoples) for the present Soviet Union to release its conquests — to free the Baltics and later to let the non-Russian republics choose a commonwealth.

That is the outcome we want. With our purpose thus clarified, we can dispense with false policy choices. We are not required to choose between (a) helping Baltic nations achieve independence and (b) helping Gorbachev remain in place so he can remove troops from Eastern Europe.

We can do both. By encouraging the loosening process, we speed the removal of Russian troops from the internal and external empires. The Baltics, with their unassailable claim to independence, offer a timely bridge toward separation with civility.

Perhaps it is undiplomatic for a President of the U.S. to articulate this daring policy. He can say only that he favors perestroika.

But our foreign policy goal should be peaceful Soviet un-union. Dissolving central control will generate new tensions for Moscow and for us, but the result will be better than the perpetuation of a bankrupt monolith repressing a sullen population. □